

Grower created own drying process

CARVER — He couldn't buy them and no one would make them for him, so he decided to make them himself.

John Decas decided in 1993 he wanted to expand his family's cranberry business into processing and products.

"I saw other companies making money on our cranberries and figured we could do it, too," Decas said. "Since dried cranberries were the hottest and fastest growing commodity, I started there."

Decas first tried to buy the product wholesale from Ocean Spray, but the cranberry giant wouldn't sell to him.

"They sold to others who re-packaged the product and sold it, but for some reason they considered me more of a competitor," Decas said.

Decas then approached dried fruit companies and asked them to make dried cranberries for him.

"It wasn't quite the product I was looking for, and they didn't have the capacity to meet my demand because they were busy making dried cherries," Decas said.

"That's when I decided to make them myself. Everyone told me I couldn't, because Ocean Spray had patented the product. So I came up with a different process to produce a different product."

After two years of research and development in a garage-size building in Buffalo, two years designing and building his new Carver plant and a couple of false starts, he's making dried cranberries by the millions.

"It was harder than I thought," he said. "I figured after spending several million dollars, you just pushed the button and everything would work. It doesn't work that way."

His Carver plant started up last year, but the yields, product and costs were unacceptable so he shut it down in December.

"We went back to our research, which showed it could be done, and figured out where we went wrong," Decas said. "We retrofitted the entire plant, turned it back on in January and viola, the berries started flowing."

At least until one of the commercial driers broke.

With that fixed, the plant has been running as envisioned since March.

Decas has patents pending on much of the machinery in his plant and is tight lipped about his process and production.

"I didn't build the plant to spite Ocean Spray or anything," Decas said. "I just wanted to expand. But it does give me a great deal of satisfaction to have succeeded when many said it couldn't be done."